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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 001158

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: TURKEY AND ITS KURDS: STARS ARE ALIGNED

REF: A. ANKARA 1146

[1](#)B. ANKARA 1155

Classified By: Ambassador James Jeffrey for reasons 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: With increasing prominence and gusto, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government in recent weeks has been proclaiming its desire to find a lasting solution to the Kurdish "problem." Though the details are officially still under discussion, it is clear that AKP is mobilizing all of its assets, from Parliament and the Presidency to the state bureaucracy, to address the issue as broadly as possible. Support for the initiative by Turkish military chief general Basbug has been an important catalyst for the opening. Basbug's support, in turn, would not have been possible without the ongoing real-time intelligence support the US provides to Turkey against the PKK. Though the political stars are aligned like never before, the road before AKP is still fraught with obstacles. Nevertheless, this initiative, praised and encouraged by President Obama during his April speech to the Turkish Grand National Assembly, is an absolutely critical step forward, which, if carried out fully, will have a dramatic effect on Turkey's internal situation even beyond the PKK, and could well help further stabilize the situation in Northern Iraq as well. It deserves our full, careful, but vocal support. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Part of AKP policy, since the party's founding, has been a reconciliation with Turkey's Kurds in an effort to remove the systemic prejudices and inequalities that have fed the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) terrorist group's campaign of violence. Over its seven-year term in office, the AKP government has taken sporadic moves in the direction of meeting Kurdish needs -- most prominently with the New Year's inauguration of a state television channel in Kurdish -- but these steps had come under criticism as being driven by electoral politics and not a sincere desire to truly reform Turkey's relationship with its Kurdish citizens. The government is on the brink of announcing a "Kurdish Initiative" that may prove the naysayers wrong.

[1](#)3. (C) The details of the plan are still officially under development and coordination. Prime Minister Erdogan has met twice with the members of his cabinet who sit on the National Security Council; in both meetings, Besir Atalay, the Minister of Interior, presented reports on the initiative. In a groundbreaking step, Erdogan (albeit as AKP leader and not as Prime Minister) also met with the Democratic Society Party (DTP) leadership last week to discuss the initiative.

14. (C) Chief of the Turkish General Staff Ilker Basbug announced that he, too, recognizes that a wide-ranging political, economic, and societal approach is essential to defeating the PKK and reconciling with Turkey's Kurds. Turkey's projected Undersecretariat for Security, a body designed to coordinate military, intelligence, and political actors in a comprehensive counterterrorism posture, is very much a part of the government's Kurdish Initiative. The military's cooperative position would not have been possible without the ongoing intelligence support provided by the US to Turkey against the PKK.

15. (SBU) Atalay, in one of his press conferences on the issue, said that the government would release details of the plan as appropriate and that some initiatives were already underway. As evidence of this, the Turkish National Police (TNP) held a workshop on the Kurdish issue on August 1, discussing it not only from the point of view of security, but as a social and economic issue as well, drawing on the experience of academic experts and other countries that had struggled with nationalist minority terrorist organizations (most notably, the UK and Spain). This week, President Gul embraced the tragedy of Mem and Zen, written in 1694 by a Kurdish native of Hakkari, as "as much a part of Turkish culture" as Byzantine monuments and Akdamar Armenian Church. He also referred to Guroymak, a town in Bitlis province, as Norsin, its Kurdish name before an official change in 1987. Meanwhile, Hakkari Municipality has begun to use the Kurdish name for the city on some of its property.

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16. (C) These steps foreshadow more to come, but how much more is still uncertain. The government has to tread carefully so as not to appear to be negotiating with terrorists. Abdullah Ocalan, the imprisoned leader of the PKK, is scheduled to release a "roadmap" for reconciliation on August 15. A rough draft released on July 27 included ten recommendations. Some of them -- such as establishing a truth and reconciliation council, amendment of the constitution to erase ethnic terminology, and the offering of an amnesty to PKK members still at large -- have been successful in other countries, but carry enough political baggage in Turkey to be a minefield. The government has laid out definite redlines: there will be no granting of autonomy, there will be no education conducted in Kurdish, and there will be no reference to Kurds or the Kurdish language in the constitution.

17. (C) In a conversation with the Ambassador August 10, the PM's diplomatic advisor Ibrahim Kalin said that he and eventually the PM were convinced that the time has come to meet with DTP leader Ahmet Turk. Kalin was vague on the specifics, but said the plan would involve a de facto GoT and TGS "cease-fire" that is expected to be followed by the PKK. This would then create an atmosphere to introduce more far-ranging economic, political, and cultural steps. Care must be taken, he went on, not to go too far down that road absent a general reduction/cessation of violence, or else the AKP will be vulnerable to attacks both from the nationalist Action Party (MHP) (whose only issue is the Kurds, Kalin added), and from the Republican People's Party (CHP) which disappointingly and surprisingly is following almost the same xenophobic line as the MHP.

18. (C) AKP MP Salih Kapusuz pointed out that though Kurds will benefit, it is perhaps inappropriate to think of the initiative as a Kurdish project; rather it is a democratization project which will embrace everyone, including Kurds. The organizers of the TNP workshop described to us a number of possible steps that they discussed which fall short of Ocalan's points but which may nonetheless be sufficient. They described, for example, the teaching of Kurdish as an elective course, rather than as the primary language of instruction and the offering of an

amnesty for all but the senior leaders of the PKK, complete with an economic reintegration program and protection from prosecution for other crimes, such as not performing mandatory military service.

¶9. (C) As Kalin mentioned, the opposition is prepared to pounce on any misstep. MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli has been harshly critical of the process from its onset, accusing the government of negotiating with the PKK and laying the ground for the division of the state, not just by Kurds, but also by other ethnic groups, including Greeks, Armenians, Arabs, Laz, and Circassians. In his version of events, the government will soon be referring to Istanbul as "Constantinople." The CHP is more muted in its criticism, but is concerned. CHP chairman Deniz Baykal set forth a week ago the redlines AKP has since adopted. He told the Ambassador in their meeting on August 5 (REF A) that AKP has, as usual, not brought CHP into the planning, and so, without details, CHP can neither support nor criticize the initiative. However, he recognized that the time has come for the Turkish state to welcome its Kurdish citizens fully. DTP is much more optimistic (REF B), but considers Abdullah Ocalan a legitimate interlocutor for the Kurds. Though DTP understands the state's reluctance to talk to him directly, if enough of his points are not included in the plan, DTP could denounce it as insufficient. Without DTP and at least CHP cooperation, there will be no actors to soothe rejectionists among Kurdish or Turkish nationalists, and the Kurdish project could devolve into another contest between AKP and the rest of Turkish society.

¶10. (C) The greater part of civil society organizations are publicly and privately taking a "wait and see" approach to the initiative. They see promise in the positive development that has taken place so far, but they, too, complain that they have seen no concrete steps outlined for the way forward. Some groups highlighted that any project would need to address the economic and educational rights of Kurdish

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citizens in addition to political and social rights. They also express hope that the government will work together with them on future initiatives, as social outreach and trust-building will be crucial for success. Even NGOs traditionally opposed to a compromise on Kurdish issues may be warm on AKP's plan: in Sirnak province, mothers of both soldiers and PKK militants killed in clashes came together August 8 under NGO auspices, in a historic outreach event, to call for an end to bloodshed under government auspices.

¶11. (C) Comment: The government's initiative is ambitious and important, but necessarily cautious. Its steps must be carefully weighed to both create a suitable atmosphere for reform and to deliver those reforms at an appropriate pace. The opposition parties, combined with hard-nosed nationalists in the courts and bureaucracy, will continue to offer resistance, which AKP must anticipate and prepare for. So long as both the elements of the plan and the opposition to those elements are carried out in a transparent, democratic form, Turkish democracy will benefit. But success of the government's program could do much to transform Turkish society into a fairer, more just society and remove the sources of Kurdish discontent that have served as a destabilizing force in Turkish politics. AKP has taken it upon itself to set Turkey on a long, arduous path on its own volition. Turkey should be encouraged to stay on this path, for the outcome will have far-reaching ramifications for Turkey, Turkey's relationship with the West, and for the Middle East as a whole.

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